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ABSTRACT

In the United Kingdom, outdoor educators have varied backgrounds in terms of academic versus professional outdoor training, and the profession has not agreed upon required qualifications. Multiple influences in the historical development of outdoor education have contributed to this situation. Since the 1970s, several U.K. colleges and universities have offered degree courses for outdoor educators. Such courses must address not only academic and technical skills training, but also the need to develop educators' professionalism and sound judgment. Moray House Institute of Education (Scotland), now part of the University of Edinburgh, has addressed this issue. Since its inception in 1972, Moray's outdoor education degree evolved from a Diploma to a Postgraduate Diploma, which was subsequently modularized, and now a Postgraduate Certificate-Diploma-Master's pathway is available. The program draws upon outdoor activities to enhance environmental education and personal and social development, all within a framework of safe professional practice. A practical, experiential approach is emphasized. The following program areas are described: academic modules; a competency program covering technical skills, instructional skills, planning and organizational skills, and sound judgment; and extended study and dissertation required at the master's level. (SV)

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Training Outdoor Educators: Integrating Academic and Professional Demands

by
Peter Higgins and Alastair Morgan

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Peter Higgins and Alastair Morgan

Training Outdoor Educators : Integrating Academic and Professional Demands

'Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind'
(Kant 1933 : 93)

This paper explores the 'tension' between the demands of academic and professional training for outdoor educators. The courses offered at Moray House Institute, University of Edinburgh provide an example of one attempt at resolution.

A Historical Context

The roots of outdoor education as a distinct subject area in the formal and informal education sectors are spread both deep and wide. It is probably true to say that at various stages in its development its proponents have been functional, reactive, opportunist and occasionally proactive. Most of the developments in the UK have taken place in response to events of national or legislative significance and even with the benefit of hindsight it is difficult to discern a pattern or clear direction. Perhaps because of its inter- and multi-disciplinary approach it is difficult to place developments against a time-line. In preference developments in a number of significant areas are outlined below.

The many significant events and initiatives in the UK between the early 19th Century and early 1970s are considered in some detail by Parker and Meldrum (1973). The most significant of these themes are:

1. the impact of legislation relating to protection of the countryside, (eg National Parks, Forestry Commission, Protection of Wildlife etc) holiday provision for employees;

2. increasing public awareness of exploration through expeditions to the Arctic, Antarctic and the greater ranges (especially the successful ascent of Everest in 1953);

3. the development of environmental studies in education through a number of significant reports and education acts, a number of which make direct reference to the educational importance of direct contact with the natural world;

4. the development of outdoor activities in education which had its origin in physical education provision in the 19th Century, but subsequently became the more directed 'character development' promoted by amongst others Kurt Hahn (the founder of the Outward Bound movement);

5. the 'progressive' education movement which grew in influence throughout the

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20th Century until the 1970s, and its reliance on experiential educational techniques;

6. the growth in interest in outdoor activities which show dramatic increases from the 1950s onwards.

The overall consequence of this mixture of influences was significant in that forms of outdoor and environmental education were considered to be a 'good thing' and legislation which allowed or promoted this form of provision was brought forward (eg 1944 Education Act). During the 1960s it was fashionable for education authorities to establish their own provision and many models were devised. However one major consequence was the development of residential outdoor education centres and many local authorities had their own by the late 1960s.

Outdoor education probably found its most substantive educational justification throughout this period in the theory of experiential education. This 'student centred' approach argues that the learning potential of direct experience is more substantial than other approaches to education. Its significant advocates stretch from Aristotle in ancient Greece to, amongst many others, Dewey and Friere in the 20th Century. (For a recent history see Kraft, 1984).

Formal outdoor education provision has seen something of a decline in the UK since the 1970s and there may be many reasons for this. Amongst these perhaps the most significant are reduced central funding to local education authorities and a lack of a firm foothold in the academic curricula of schools. Whether the lack of favour for a direct experiential approach to education is the result of a change in educational dogma, or the change in dogma a result of an expedient approach to reduced funding is difficult to discern. Nonetheless the tension between a traditional academic approach and an experiential approach exists at all levels of outdoor education provision, and a lack of funding for the smaller group sizes required is a common problem.

Training Outdoor Educators

Opportunities for training and qualification as an outdoor educator now exist at a number of levels in the UK. There is no set career pathway nor required qualifications agreed upon by the profession. However the majority of those working in the field will have a minimum of personal competence in a number of activities and the relevant National Governing Body (NGB) instructional awards. Although traditionally many have entered the profession without a specialised degree in the field, a substantial proportion have been trained and qualified as teachers or community educators. They may have qualified in almost any discipline, but bring their experience to bear (together with skills in teaching the activities) to be effective instructors/teachers.

In the early 1970s degree courses were established at a number of colleges and universities in the UK (see Parker and Meldrum, 1973). The main institutions offering such courses were Charlotte Mason College (Cumbria), I M Marsh College (Liverpool), Moray House and Dunfermline Colleges (Edinburgh) and University

College of North Wales, Bangor. Additionally many colleges (eg Loughborough) incorporated outdoor education as an integral part of their physical education teacher training courses, though this provision is now very limited. In recent years many other Further and Higher Education institutions have entered the field, offering a wide range of levels of training courses.

In order to meet the academic requirements of a Certificate, Diploma or Degree those following such courses are assessed in one way or another. However the 'professional' aspect of the work of an outdoor educator requires training and assessment of a different nature. In many cases the 'measure' of this is provided by the National Governing Body awards of the individual outdoor activities, but issues of professionalism and sound judgement are difficult to address. The following case study is presented as one attempt at resolution of this issue by an institution with one of the longest histories of involvement in the UK.

Outdoor Education at Moray House Institute:Scotland

Since 1972 Moray House Institute of Education (formerly Moray House College) has conducted a Diploma in Outdoor Education each academic year. Much of the impetus for this development came as a result of demands for training following the 'Cairngorm incident' in which 6 Edinburgh schoolchildren under the supervision of a school teacher died in a blizzard in 1971. Normally 12 to 14 students have been accepted for the course which is designed to meet the needs of those who wish to enter or further develop careers in outdoor education.

In 1987 Moray House College and Dunfermline College of Physical Education merged. Both had long traditions of involvement in outdoor education, formal courses both pre-service and in-service being features of life in the colleges for many years. The original concern was largely to ensure the safe conduct of parties on school excursions. The emphasis in these courses was primarily on outdoor activities and this resulted in a very strong practical programme. (In 1998 Moray House Institute merged with the University of Edinburgh and became its Faculty of Education.)

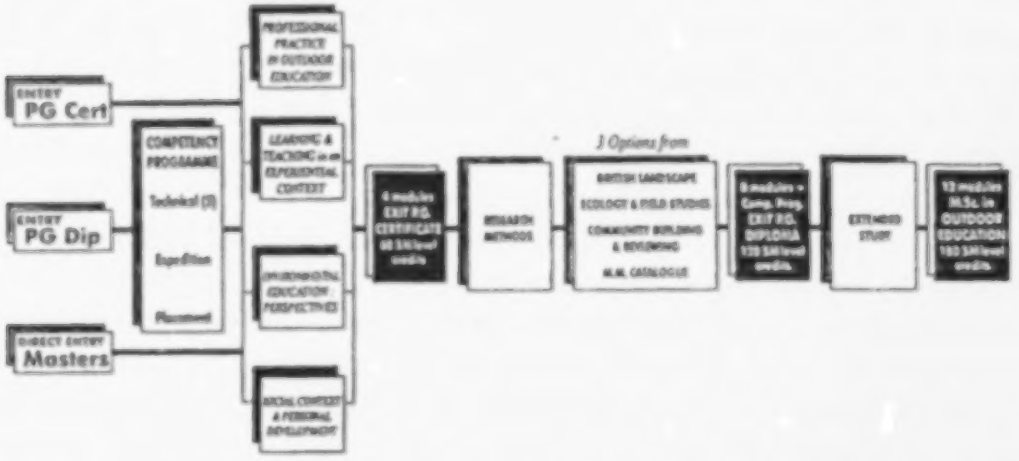
However, the broader responsibilities of outdoor education teachers soon became recognised and the emphasis in training has, for some time now, been on encouraging teachers and instructors to extend their aspirations for their students beyond the physical to the academic, aesthetic, spiritual, environmental and social. This is a view which we believe would be supported by the majority of those who have taken a philosophical perspective on outdoor education (e.g. Drasdo, 1972; Mortlock, 1983; Higgins and Loynes, 1997).

Throughout this 26 year history there has been a frequent need to revalidate the course. Through this process it has metamorphosed from a Diploma to a Postgraduate Diploma which was subsequently modularised, and now a Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma/Masters pathway is available. The changes reflect shifts in philosophy but more so the expediency of maintaining a resource-intensive

course in the face of increasing pressure.

However the range and scope of outdoor education and the important safety considerations place special demands on awards of this type. Consequently in recent validations we have successfully argued for a course which draws upon outdoor activities to enhance environmental education and personal and social development, all

Figure 1 **PG CERTIFICATE / DIPLOMA / MSc OUTDOOR EDUCATION MODULAR PROGRESSION (Revised Framework)**



within a framework of safe professional practice. This is represented diagrammatically in Figure 1.

An Experiential Approach

Opportunities to learn through direct experience have been reduced in many aspects

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of outdoor education courses and at all levels: primarily the result of financial pressures rather than a response to an educational debate.

However, at Moray House there has always been an emphasis of practical experience in the field which reflects the philosophy of all those who have been involved in this type of work within the college. Maintenance of this position continues to be a struggle in the face of these financial pressures.

Through this approach course members have acquired an appreciation of the wide potential of the outdoors as a learning environment, and of the skills necessary to conduct groups successfully and safely in wild country and on water, whilst developing an appreciation and understanding of this environment and natural heritage. Also course members have gained an awareness of the opportunities offered in outdoor teaching for developing knowledge of self, allied to the achievement of a range of social goals.

Course Structure

The structure of the course is represented diagrammatically in Figure 2. This conforms to the 'Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer System' which requires four academic modules (defined in terms of student effort etc) for exit at Postgraduate Certificate; a further four for Postgraduate Diploma and a further extended study leading to a

Figure 2

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dissertation for a Masters degree. The outdoor education postgraduate pathway follows this model for academic development and appraisal, and in addition requires that technical and professional development is given due importance in a substantial additional Competency Programme. This is required for all those who wish to graduate at Post Graduate Diploma level. The structure is shown in Figure 2.

The Academic Modules

Each module has been designed to be internally coherent and consistent. Each has a discrete assessment available to enable course members to gain credit for individual modules. The four core modules are those required for the Postgraduate Certificate. Central to this must be 'Professional Practice'. This module seeks to provide outdoor educators working within a changing professional context with an overview of the aims, philosophies and practice of outdoor education.

The requirements for effective and safe teaching in the outdoors are examined in the second module. This seeks to extend course members understanding of the characteristics of learners and the implications of these for learning and consequently for teaching.

An increasing awareness of environmental issues should be a feature of all forms of education. Outdoor educators are, we believe, uniquely placed to make an impact in this regard. The 'Environmental Perspectives' module sets out to examine individual and institutional perspectives on environmental education, the starting point for considering the nature of, and provision for, environmental education in all types of educational institutions.

Personal and social development is a fundamental aspect of everyone's education which is essentially concerned with the development of life skills. This module considers the development process and explores how, through carefully designed programmes, outdoor education can contribute.

The 'Research Methods' module is a required element which seeks to encourage the skills of critical thinking and analysis. Research in outdoor education has so far been extremely limited, and the inclusion of this module should be seen as an attempt to both ensure that graduates are not intimidated by the concept of 'research' within their own work, and to stimulate new study in the field which should provide a more detailed understanding of theory and practice.

A further three modules may be selected from those shown, of which one may be chosen from the wide range available in the College 'Modular Masters Catalogue'.

Competency Programme

The integration of an activity or technical programme with an academic programme, poses a major dilemma. The academic structure described earlier is designed to

encourage academic expansion but consequently restricts the uniquely practical nature of outdoor education.

There is a clear professional requirement for technical ability in a range of outdoor activities. Furthermore the experiences gained whilst on placement and on the group expedition have long been considered valuable by both course members and future employers and may be considered as gelling agents for the core academic inputs. Repeated attempts were made to accommodate them within the conventional academic structure, however this always proved unacceptable and resulted in compromise to their detriment. Consequently a separate Competency Programme was devised for those embarking on the Diploma pathway.

The safety and professionalism arguments behind insistence on a Competency Programme for Diploma course members are compelling. Furthermore, if an experiential approach is the essence of outdoor education, without this there would be no shared experience to draw upon in the more academic aspects of the course. A small number of recent fatal accidents have continued to reinforce the notion that competent leadership and sound judgement remain vital. An increasing readiness amongst the public to resort to litigation in incidents involving personal injury and death, and the Government's new policy of inspecting and accrediting outdoor agencies further emphasises the importance of experience and appropriate qualification. Despite its essentially practical nature there is great scope within the Competency Programme for academic analysis, reflection and research.

For the purposes of the present course 'competence' on the part of the leader is defined in three main areas:

a Technical Competence

This is a measure of technical skills in a number of outdoor activities. It is convenient and appropriate to adopt the requirements of the various National Governing Body awards as performance indicators. Course members should develop the skills of moving over and living in wild country, gain teaching skills associated with these activities and develop an awareness of the conditions necessary for the safe conduct of parties. Focus is on the nature of experiential learning through participant centred approaches. Course members are expected to select a minimum of five activities of which at least one must be water based and one land based. Activities offered include mountaineering (summer and winter), rock climbing and orienteering skiing (alpine or nordic), kayaking, open canoeing, windsurfing and dinghy sailing.

b Professional Competence

In this instance this is taken as an expression of the ability to 'teach', 'instruct' or 'facilitate' in a vocational context. Substantial varied experience in the field of outdoor education is regarded as an indicator in this respect. To allow course

members to develop appropriately and extend professional competence there must be a significant element of direct involvement in teaching and leading out of doors. In order to achieve this and provide a useful personal study of operational programme and curricular issues a five week placement or professional experience is included.

c **Sound Judgement**

A long term personal commitment to activity and involvement in a number of outdoor pursuits should lead through experience to sound judgement and a well tested framework for risk assessment. Course members are required to plan, prepare for, undertake and report on a group expedition which takes place towards the end of the academic year. The experience is intended to provide an opportunity to use the outdoor and organisational skills and knowledge developed throughout the year. Participants are required to take real responsibility and make decisions that reflect a wide range of factors that impinge upon each situation. Personal and group strength and limitations and parameters of the expedition itself dictate that course members evaluate their achievement in the light of the many judgements made. It is this process of acquiring experience in the outdoors that leads to the development of wise and competent professionals.

The formal elements of the Competency Programme are complemented by encouragement for course members to pursue a full range of activities on an informal basis.

A Masters Degree in Outdoor Education

The development of what we believe to be the first Masters degree in outdoor education available in Europe is a natural consequence of the long tradition of outdoor education at Moray House. Through this we hope to offer a broad perspective on a now more mature world of outdoor education and to stimulate research interest.

Those course members who have successfully satisfied the academic requirements of the Postgraduate Diploma pathway and the requirements of the Competency Programme will, provided they have appropriate professional experience, be able to proceed to Masters level.

It is also possible for experienced and qualified professionals to gain direct entry to the Masters programme. These applicants bring a depth of experience, competency and qualification which obviates the need for a full Competency Programme. However, all academic aspects of the Postgraduate Diploma pathway must be undertaken before continuation to the extended study for the Masters degree.

Those who wish to continue to Masters level must submit a dissertation based on an extended study. The expectation is that this should be a substantial piece of work which is of publishable quality, thus contributing to the body of knowledge in the field.

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The Future

The above programme was devised whilst attempting to balance ideology and expediency. Whilst it is demanding of staff time it does comply with our own philosophy of outdoor education and provides the opportunity for course members to engage in an 'apprenticeship' experience which should serve them well in employment.

So far this and the majority of programmes at Institutes of Further and Higher Education have managed to preserve some balance in course structure and provision. However, it is our experience, and that of many of our colleagues in other institutions that the pressures are increasing and that it is difficult to win the arguments for an experiental approach without which 'outdoor education' ceases to have much meaning. At present it is still possible to find good practice in a range of courses available in the UK where both the academic and professional demands are satisfied.

The continued existence of this situation is, we believe, vital both for the professional outdoor sector and the development of outdoor education as a distinctive, philosophically based academic discipline.

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